RITCHIE, MICKEY AND ME

HM drum supremo Cozy Powell spills the beans to SYLVIE SIMMONS

COZY POWELL, and a bottle of beer are sitting under an umbrella at the Sunset Marquis hotel in Holywood, by the very same swimming pool where the drummer once broke his nose showing off to the suntanned starlets.

"Which is all I can break; I'm a drummer and if I break anything else it's over, isn't it?"

When we spoke, the American tour with the Michael Schenker Group had just finished; "the hardest tour I've ever done of any band I've been with", moaned Cozy.

The band had only just been assembled before going straight into a British tour, then out for over two months straight in the States, plus driving inbetween all the gigs in bad weather in a small tour bus.

"It was good for me in a way, though, because it was a step down from the quote rockstar unquote sort of trip where you fly everywhere and get treated like royalty. It was good for me to get a kick up the arse."

For the last nine weeks the Cozy Powell arse has been firmly planted behind a drum kit in small clubs ("which I loathe") and on bills opening for everyone from cowboy band Molly Hatchet ("a total mismatch") to Cheap Trick.

"It's always difficult when you're supporting because you've got to take it as it comes. The audience has mainly come to see the headliners — but there are certain cases, when you've got a band like Michael's who's been around before, or myself, they'll come and see the individual people just to see what they're doing. So of course, we are having it alot easier than a lot of bands that are just starting out."

The last time I spoke to Cozy, he was moaning about pretty much the same thing with Rainbow, which had resorted to supporting then far-from-superstars REO Speedwagon in an attempt to break the States. A case of here we go again?

"Yes. I seem to spend my life trying to crack America. The first tour I did of the States was in 1969 with Jeff Beck, which was an immediate headline thing, and ever since then I've been coming over here to the Final Challenge. I'm getting sick and tired of trying to crack America. Maybe someday I will."

MAYBE if he had stayed with Rainbow — after all, the hits keep coming . . .

"Yeah — Rainbow started getting far too commercial and I'd long lost interest in the stuff we'd done.

"I think it's all gone sour, Rainbow, for some reason, I don't think Ritchie realised how good a band he had at one point. That possibly sounds a little conceited on my part, but I think the band was really together and gelling really well and everything was working out really nice, and he just seemed to throw it all away. He didn't seem to want to play anymore and lost interest, I don't know."

Maybe he'd been so busy looking for the perfect line-up he couldn't see he had it under his nose?"

"Could be. Ritchie and I are still really good friends. He came to see us a while ago. I left the band very amicably and there's no hard feelings. I just think five years was quite long enough. We'd both seen enough of each other. It's a long time to work with any relationship, especially in an artistic way, and it was better to part as friends rather than as enemies. A lot of people who have left or been fired from Rainbow have gone on less good terms than I did.

"I felt that the time had come when I wasn't putting 100% of what I could do into the band, and when you feel like you're just picking up your paycheck at the end of the week, then it's time to get out. Why bother? I'd go and work at Fords and bang out car parts if I felt like that about it.

"If I do something I want to do it properly or not at all. There is no in-between with me. It's the same with anything else I do. I figured it was time to get out of Rainbow while the band still had a lot of respect.

"Since then I don't know what they'll do. I wish Ritchie a lot of luck because he's going to need it. Because he's changed personnel so many times now that the kids are going to start to lose a lot of faith in the band." As for his replacement: "I saw him

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COZY POWELL: "I'm a bit of a hired hand" *Pic by Chris Walter*

COZY

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skulking about at Donnington but he kept well out of my way!

"I did offer Ritchie that I'd show him a few of the things we did. There's certain little bits of Ritchie that I know because I've worked with him for so long, and someone coming in fresh might not know. But he'll find out the hard way. Good luck? I think after Ronnie Dio was — er — asked to leave, there was only Ritchie and I left. And I think people figured if we ever did part company, there wouldn't be anybody left of the original band.

"When I finally did leave, a lot of the press jumped on it and said, 'that's it, Rainbow's finished', especially because Graham Bonnet, who was on that hit record, also left. I don't know. It's just that it's the 18th personnel change!"

Maybe it will drive Ritchie to a Deep Purple reunion?

"I wish he would hurry up and do it for his sake, the fans' sake and everyone else's sake. All you seem to hear last year was Deep Purple this, Deep Purple that. I wish he'd go and collect his million dollars and give everyone a break!"

TALKING of breaking, two years ago Cozy told me he couldn't see staying with Rainbow — or rock and roll for that matter — for more than a year. Okay, give or take 12 months the Rainbow departure happened. But he's still behind the drums and not the steering wheel. So what happened?

"I got an offer to do Le Mans this year — the same thing last year. But to do a race like that you've got to come up with a lot of money sponsorship-wise, and you have to take off a lot of time. The trouble is, if I take off the time to do the race, I'm not in the public eye to get the money, so it's Catch 22. It's a year out of your life gone, just as you're starting to build up your playing, your standard, to go racing. It's a vicious circle.

"The trouble is they both mean the same to me. I keep chosing between the two, trying to figure out which is going to give me the most satisfaction. Motor racing has now got to the point where you can't just do it as a fun thing. You have to have a lot of money behind you — 50 grand to so a season's racing. So you have to go to a company and tell them why you're worth 50,000 to them.

"If someone in a rock band drives a racing car it's a bit different. But then there's one or two people doing it — Nick Mason in the Floyd races in Le Mans, so it's nothing new. And I'm not Paul Newman so I can't command the sort of money he would get."

Cozy takes the opportunity to challenge Terrible Ted Nugent to go on the race track, concluding that the American Celebrity Jeep circuit is "all a bit airy-fairy. Racing in England is serious stuff. It separates the men from the boys. I'm just trying to get enough cash now to do what little bit of racing I can."

The Good Money Fairy came in the shape of Peter Mench, Michael Schenker's manager. After Cozy left Rainbow (after giving a year's notice, but no-one believed him when the time came to quit) he worked for a while with Gary Moore, thinking of forming a band when he was contacted to do the MSG tour.

"So I said, okay if you give me X thousand dollars I'll do it. And he came up with the dollars so here I am. Peter Mench is rolling in it, what with his AC/DC money and the Scorpions and Def Leppard."

The idea was to get a bunch of experienced musicians together, "players who'd been around a while and knew what they were doing, so he could go on the road and get something done immediately. Schooling inexperienced musicians takes five times longer, and it would have been a total cock-up.

"I'm still not saying the band is particularly good right now, because it isn't, but it's a lot better than it could have been. It was like, go out on the road and start working, to keep Michael away from shaving his hair, running up the walls and going berserk and taking all those weird substances he's reported to take."

COZY certainly knows how to pick them. Jeff Beck, Ritchie Blackmore, then the number one candidate for the rock casualty ward, Schenker. Masochistic?

"Well they have to have somebody to kick these people up the arse who can take it. I've never found all those people that difficult.

"Okay, Jeff is difficult because he knows what he wants, and Ritchie is just difficult because a lot of peole misunderstand him. But Michael is a breeze. He really has straightened himself right out.

"All the stories I heard about him — when I started working with him I couldn't understand where they came from. He knows exactly what he wants, and he's 100% into the music. It's his life. He's easy to work with.

"Anyway, if you get close enough to the person you work with and try to find out why it is they do what they do, then you can understand their attitude.

"I've worked with some difficult people, but it's a challenge. It would have been boring to have gone with common average people because if they're that way in their personality they'll probably be the same onstage. At least they've got this little bit of sparkle when they play that makes me play harder."

The concert we caught didn't make it look like Cozy was playing as hard as usual.No Tchaikovsky-ish drum solos for one thing.

"I think people have got a bit sick and tired of drum solos. Drum solos are a pain in the arse, a real bore, which is why I tried to do my solo with a little bit of flash and gimmicks and rubbish to make it more interesting. The next thing I want to do is totally over the top, but it costs a lot of money and it's too big a production for some clubs. So if I don't do a solo, I prefer just to play as part of the band.

"You're right, I wasn't featured as much as I could be with MSG. But then again, when you're playing UFO tunes, how can you go berserk? UFO tunes to me isn't exactly the greatest thing since sliced bread! They leave me cold."

He makes the whole thing sound like some rock and roll Alfred Marks Bureau — the bands' hired help.

"I am a bit of a hired hand, which is why things are going to have to change if I'm to stay with this band". He chose not to elaborate. He's signed up to do an album with the band, "but whether or not I complete that remains to be seen. There's been all sorts of other offers since then. It's Make Your Mind Up time again.

"It's very flattering, but then you've got to take it while you can, because next year your name could be at the bottom of the heap. I'm not saying it's at the top, but at least I get a few offers here and there."

OF THESE "major bands", he won't comment except to say "I don't do it for the money anymore. I've been in enough succesful bands that that's okay. The challenge is the most important thing. It's an old cliche, but in my case it's true. The harder the job, the more interested I am in doing it."

As for the Led Zeppelin rumours, "no comment", except that he was thinking of taking the newspaper to court that misquoted him and his future role with Zep after Bonham — an old friend of his — died.

The solo stuff is still going strong — thanks to adulation from Japan, much to his surprise, which gave his record company the boost to keep him on. Drummers don't often get the spotlight.

"No they don't. It's always the guitar hero and the drummer's forgotten. Still I've always enjoyed being a drummer. I tried playing the guitar and failed dismally. I'd rather hit a drumkit than someone else. Saves me getting into trouble!"